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NOTES

THE INTERNATIONAL TAX ASSOCIATION

The fourth annual conference of the International Tax Association was held at Milwaukee, August 30 to September 2. The program was excellent and the discussions were most interesting and instructive. Yet, in one respect at least, the conference must be characterized as a total failure. One of the prime objects of the organization, according to its promoters, has been to enlist the university teachers of public finance on the side of practical tax reform. Last year at Louisville this desire of those interested in the success of the association seemed in a fair way to be fulfilled. This year, however, only five or six representatives of colleges and universities attended the conference, and these declared their intention to stay away from future meetings, leaving the association entirely in the hands of state and local tax officials. The failure is more apparent than real, however, for many college teachers and scientifically trained men are now connected with state and city tax and assessment boards. Upon these men devolves the important mission of saving the association from intellectual bankruptcy.

The first session of the conference, held on the afternoon of August 30, was devoted to preliminaries. The evening session was mainly given over to a consideration of Professor Bullock's paper on the property tax in Switzerland and Professor Adams' paper on the income tax as a substitute for the personal property tax. These two eminent tax experts concluded that either a personal property tax or an income tax based on personal declaration of income works admirably so long as the tax remains so insignificant in amount that the taxpayer feels no burden or inconvenience therefrom. This profound discovery would be more valuable if it bore some discernible relation to equableness and justice in taxation or even possessed the very doubtful fiscal virtue of yielding considerably increased revenues. The income of the state cannot be greatly increased by means of a tax so low in rate that people generally will not regard it as worth while evading, and the inequalities of taxation will not be appreciably minimized by it.

Wednesday morning was devoted to an experience meeting. Iowa, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Ohio were heard from regarding their experiences with tax reform. The evening session was given over to the consideration of railway taxation and the tax legislation of 1910.

The reports of the various committees appointed last year were listened to on Thursday morning. This was perhaps the most interesting and important session of the whole conference. In the afternoon, problems of administration were considered. The remaining two sessions were devoted to routine and merely perfunctory business.

Throughout the conference there was manifested a distinct tendency to combat the sweeping condemnations that have been pronounced against the theory and practice of the general property tax, although the report of the committee on the causes of the failure of the general property tax consisted of the usual blasting denunciations. Several persons asserted that the general property tax had broken down on the administration side, but not on the side of theory. The theory, they asserted, was just as good and sound as the theory of the income tax. It is difficult to see how an income tax can be better enforced than the general property tax. Intangible income is quite as difficult to ferret out as is intangible personal property. If either is to be made to contribute any share, fair or unfair, to the revenues of the state, it must be mainly through indirect assessment. It really makes but very little difference whether corporate property or corporate income is assessed. If there be a preponderating advantage, it would seem to be in favor of assessing property rather than income. In any case those optimists who expect to revolutionize the collection of taxes by changing the basis of assessment will probably be disappointed.

The International Tax Association could probably accomplish more good if it offered a less ambitious program at its annual meeting. Not necessarily fewer papers, but fewer subjects would seem to be desirable. A thorough discussion of one or two assigned topics is better than the presentation of a multitude of problems.

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